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AUTHOR O'Hare, Christopher
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ABSTRACT

The effects of first-session interviewer self-disclosures that differed in three levels of intimacy--low, medium and high--and three kinds of temporal focus--historical (past tense and external to the interview process), current (present tense and external to the interview process), and existential in which the interviewer disclosed immediate personal experiences of the subject to the subject--were investigated by a therapy analogue study. A trend analysis indicated that: (1) medium intimacy interviewer disclosures tended to be most facilitative of percentage of emitted subject disclosures and level of subject problem expression; (2) the three temporal focuses showed no significant main effect; and (3) existential disclosures tended to be most facilitative. (Author)

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Impact of Therapist Self-Disclosure

Christopher O'Hare

California State College, San Bernardino

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Abstract

Psychotherapy theorists have long debated the appropriateness and impact of therapist self-disclosure. Historically, there seems to have been a shift from Freud advocating that the therapist remain neutral and unknown to the client, to many humanist practitioners encouraging the therapist to be completely open regarding both their personal reactions to the client and their unique person outside the therapy session. Research on helper self-disclosure has found that this response tends to facilitate clients' and subjects' self-disclosure and other behaviors related to helping process. A therapy analogue study explored effects of first session interviewer self-disclosures that differed in three levels of intimacy--low, medium and high--and three kinds of temporal focus--historical (past tense and external to the interview process), current (present tense and external to the interview process), and existential in which the interviewer disclosed immediate personal experiences of the subject to the subject. A trend analysis indicated that medium intimacy interviewer disclosures tended to be most facilitative of percentage of emitted subject disclosures and level of subject problem expression. As tested by ANOVA, the three temporal focuses showed no significant main effect. Interactions were suggestive--for medium intimacy, as predicted existential disclosures tended to be most facilitative.

Impact of Therapist Self-Disclosure

Psychotherapy theorists have long debated the appropriateness and impact of therapist self-disclosure. Freud (1911-1915) believed the therapist should be neutral, keeping all personal material out of the manifest therapy process. Later, Sullivan (1954) suggested that the therapist function as a "participant observer", using disclosure to reflect back to the patient how the patient is affecting the therapist. With the growth of humanism (Journard, 1964; Rogers, 1957, 1961) the therapist has been open and genuine, with disclosure a primary vehicle to obtain these ends. Review of the research (e.g., Cozby, 1973) on helper self-disclosure indicates that this response tends to facilitate clients' and subjects' self-disclosure and other behaviors related to a helping process.

The present therapy analogue study explored the effects of interviewer self-disclosures that differed in three levels of intimacy--low, medium, and high--and three kinds of temporal focus--historical (past tense and content external to the interview process), current (present tense and content external to the interview process), and existential in which the interviewer disclosed immediate personal experiences of the subject to the subject.

While most studies (e.g., Jourard & Jaffe 1970; Truax & Carkhuff, 1965) have shown a linear relationship between interviewer self-disclosure and subject self-disclosure, some evidence (e.g., Cozby, 1972; Simonson & Bahr, 1974) suggests that high amounts or high

intimacy of interviewer self-disclosure is experienced negatively by the subject. The current study was designed to test the hypothesis that medium intimacy would be most productive of a beneficial interpersonal process. Based on humanistic and existential theories, and anecdotal clinical evidence, historical disclosures were expected to be least facilitative and existential disclosures most facilitative.

Method

Ninety-nine female undergraduates taking introductory psychology signed up for a "Study on Female Personal Concerns" in which they were told they would be asked to talk about their problems to a female interviewer. The interviewer was identified as a "Ph.D. clinical psychologist, specializing in interviewing women about their most intimate personal concerns." Just prior to the interview, subjects were asked to read a transcript of segments of subject-interviewer dialogue containing both neutral interviewer responses and interviewer self-disclosures. All interviewer responses were attributed to the woman who was about to interview the subject. The self-disclosures in the transcript were systematically varied relative to pre-evaluated level of intimacy and kind of temporal focus. Other dimensions of disclosure such as topic and length of response were controlled for. Subjects then received from the identified interviewer a 15-minute structured, tape-recorded interview about their personal concerns.

Five minute tape recorded segments between the second and seventh minute of the interview yielded three measures: the first was percentage of emitted self-disclosures, and the second was level

at which subjects expressed their personal problems relative to Van der Veen's and Tomlinson's (1967) Problem Expression Scale. Two four-sentence disclosure samples transcribed from the beginning and end of the five minute tape recorded interview segment generated the third measure, average intimacy level of emitted self-disclosure.

Results

Results (Table 1) provided some support for the hypothesis that medium intimacy of interviewer disclosure would be most productive of a beneficial process. A trend analysis indicated that a medium

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Insert Table 1 about here

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level of intimacy was more facilitative of percentage of emitted disclosures [F (1, 90) = 3.02; $p < .08$] and tended to be more facilitative of level of problem expression [F (1, 90) = 1.60; $p < .21$]. The three temporal focuses showed no differential main effects on any of the three dependent variables as measured by ANOVA (Table 1).

ANOVA's showed two of the three interactions were non-significant (Table 1). The interaction for average stage of problem expression was significant. A series of Tukey tests was performed to test for contrasts between the means (Tables 2, 3 & 4). For medium intimacy, existential focus of helper self-disclosure was significantly more

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Insert Tables 2, 3 & 4 about here

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helpful ($p < .05$) in producing higher stages of problem expression

than was historical temporal focus (Table 3). For medium intimacy, examination of mean scores for the two other outcome measures showed similar patterns (Tables 2 & 4).

Discussion

Overall, the results indicate some support for a medium level of intimacy of helper self-disclosure being most facilitative of the helping process. There is no support for overall differential effectiveness of various temporal foci, although there is some suggestion of existential temporal focus being most facilitative relative to medium intimacy of helper self-disclosure. The consistent finding of little or no difference in effect of current and historical temporal focus suggests that there is no differential effect in disclosures whose content is external to the helping process and which vary solely in terms of past and present grammatical tense.

This study has a number of implications for self-disclosure as a helper response. The findings of Simonson and his colleagues (1969, 1974) that demographic, non-personal therapist disclosures are more helpful than personal disclosures are only applicable to initial help-oriented interactions. Similarly, the current study's results suggest that medium intimacy, not high intimacy, interviewer disclosures tend to be more facilitative during an initial quasi-therapy interview. Dies (1973) found that group members who originally reacted negatively to personal therapist disclosures tended to respond much less negatively with time. Consistent with common sense, this would suggest that impact of intimacy of self-disclosure interacts with duration of the

helping relationship, such that highly intimate self-disclosures which may be initially perceived by the client as inappropriate and discomforting, might with time be perceived as reflecting therapist genuineness and spontaneity.

Relative to interaction of intimacy level and temporal focus, two consistent patterns emerge (Tables 2, 3 & 4): (1) For existential disclosures, a medium level of intimacy is more helpful of a beneficial process than either low or high intimacy; and (2) Relative to medium intimacy, existential disclosures tend to be most facilitative and historical disclosures least facilitative. The above findings would suggest that in an initial help-oriented interview that helpers would probably be more effective if they avoided making low or high intimacy existential self-disclosures and/or focused on making medium intimacy existential self-disclosures. Overall, it appears that a highly intimate disclosure within an existential focus is likely to get in the way of a help-oriented process, at least during an initial interview.

The tentatively supported finding that medium intimacy is most facilitative would sugges that follow-up research on this issue would be well warranted. In terms of temporal focus, it would be interesting to focus on the "existential" disclosures. These were a mixture of content which referred both to the interviewer's immediate, on-going experience of the subject and content which referred to the interviewer's current or past experience of someone or something outside the relationship with the subject. A follow-up study might keep

present tense and content constant and vary whether the self-disclosure refers to the interviewer's on-going experience of the subject or of someone outside the interview context. This difference generally reflects what is referred to as "process" vs. "content" disclosures. The Sullivanian notion of the therapist as a participant observer serving as a mirror by which the patient can view their impact on the world fits this "process" conception of self-disclosure. Likewise, humanist and existential writings seem to be referring to this "process" type of disclosure as facilitative as opposed to the "content" variety.

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance

	Percentages of Emitted Self-Disclosure Sentences				Average Stage of Problem Expression				Average Intimacy Level of Emitted Self-Disclosures			
Source	df	MS	F	p	df	MS	F	p	df	MS	F	p
Intimacy Level	2	3.6	1.95	.15	2	.75	1.12	.33	2	1.00	.47	.
Temporal Focus	2	.3	.15	.86	2	.70	1.05	.36	2	.08	.04	.
Intimacy x Temporal	4	2.9	1.57	.19	4	2.84	4.23	.004	4	3.05	1.43	.
Error	90	1.8			90	.67			90	2.14		

Table 2

Means of Percentages

of Emitted Self-Disclosure Sentences

Intimacy Level

Temporal Focus	Low	Medium	High	
Historical	64.6	70.9	75.0	70.2
Current	67.8	74.1	73.1	71.6
Existential	69.7	76.9	63.3	70.0
	67.4	74.0	70.5	

Table 3

Means of Average

Stage of Problem Expression[1]

Temporal Focus	Intimacy Level: Low	Medium	High	
Historical	4.43	4.17	3.98	4.20
Current	4.37	4.24	4.85	4.49
Existential	3.77	5.06	4.22	4.35
	4.19	4.49	4.35	

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1. A Tukey test (Afifi & Azen, 1972) was done to check for simple comparisons between means relative to the significant interaction found for this measure (Table 6): $q_{(9,90)} = 4.50$, $p < .05$; least significant difference $_{(.05)} = 1.11$; and $q_{(3,90)} = 3.38$, $p < .05$; least significant difference $_{(.05)} = .85$.

Table 4

Means of Average

Intimacy Level of Emitted Self-Disclosure

Temporal Focus	Intimacy Level: Low	Medium	High	
Historical	7.66	6.58	7.08	7.10
Current	6.62	6.96	7.71	7.10
Existential	6.82	7.23	7.00	7.02
	7.03	6.92	7.26	